

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JEF-11

A Buddhist Ordination Ceremony

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Bangkok 11, Thailand
June 30, 1974

Dear Mr. Nolte:

As we had hoped, our new friends at Don Chedi have begun to adopt us into their community. One result of this is that we were invited to visit them again to take part in a Buddhist ordination ceremony for two nephews of the woman from whom we bought the teak house described in JEF-10. I am reproducing below the invitation we received as well as an English translation.

นายยันต์ นางมะลิ พักอินทร์

มีความยินดีขอเชิญ ญาติ มิตร และท่านที่เคารพนับถือ ไปร่วมกุศลในการอุปสมบท

นายสมนึก นายอุดม พักอินทร์ (บุตร)

กำหนดวันอาทิตย์ที่ 30 มิถุนายน 2517 (ตรงกับวันขึ้น 11 ค่ำ เดือน 8)

เวลา 14.00 น. ทำขวัญนาค เวลา 17.00 น. ขอเชิญรับประทานอาหาร

ณ ที่บ้านคอย หมู่ที่ 1 ต.ดอนเจดีย์ อ.ดอนเจดีย์ จ.สุพรรณบุรี

วันจันทร์ที่ 1 (ขึ้น 12 ค่ำ) เช้า นำนาคไปอุปสมบท

ณ พัทธสีมา วัดดอนเจดีย์

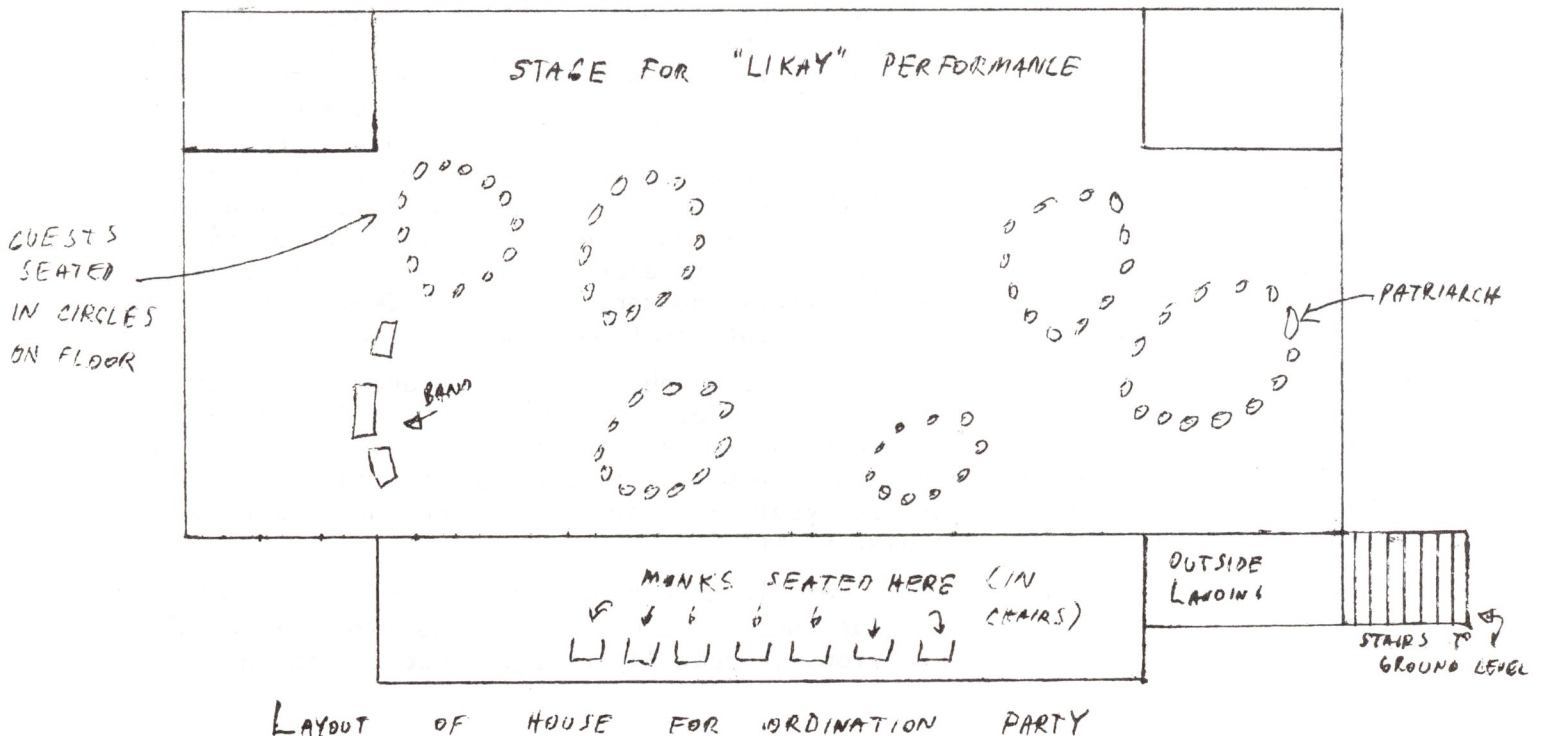
หากกรรมใดที่ผู้อุปสมบทได้ล่วงเกินท่าน ขอได้โปรดอโหสิกรรมนั้นด้วย

Jeffrey Race is an Institute Fellow investigating how the institutions of the past influence people's behavior toward one another today. His current area of study is Southeast Asia.

portant status determinant) and sit on the floor in a circle of 5 to 15 people. (The same thing is true for meals and parties with Chum's family in Bangkok, except we sit at tables. More on this in a coming letter.) The "job" of these women in the division of labor was to prepare candies for the guests. We sat down and gabbed while helping them in the "testing and quality control" phase -- we ate. Several kinds were really delicious; all were sweet and all made of natural local materials, things like egg yolks, cocoanut milk, palm sugar. The women taught me the names in Thai and were much amused when I could repeat all the names right back to them, things like "jackfruit seed candy" and "layer candy." One kind, called "han tra" in Thai, is a very old-fashioned candy "like grandma used to make," so much so that Chum had never seen it in Bangkok in all her 30 years. But here were the grandmothers sitting in a circle at Don Chedi, making things their grandsons will enjoy, but which their great-grandsons will probably have to read about in books. At the same time they were keeping an eye on the youngsters in the other circles.

Due to the importance of the ceremony, many guests had, like us, come from far away, and hence the other major activity in this house was recuperation: people were lying about on mats recovering from their journey and preparing for the evening's festivities. At about this time (4:00 p.m.) a terrific tropical rainstorm came upon us, driving even more inside and, unfortunately, causing cancellation of some of the scheduled events. We raced through the rain to see what was going on in the other house.

We found the band now inside, playing at full tilt as usual. The "patriarch" noticed us and invited us to join him in his circle opposite the band, which we were pleased to do. This old Chinese gentleman, whose wife has passed on, no doubt has a fascinating history if ever we can find it out. He may well have come from China himself, though we have not asked him. It was one of his daughters who sold us the teak house, and he in fact was the first person we saw in the area on our first trip: he was asleep under the house in the mid-day heat.



RIVER

The patriarch has divided his estate up among his four daughters, and now he lives with them in rotation. He apparently settled here a great many years ago, as the house we bought was 35 years old, and they had already been there some time when they bought that. The whole family is quite well established now, having the long strip along the river with their houses, a big truck, fruit orchards, and a lot of rice land in production. (I'll say more about this toward the end of this letter.) Although the area is fairly accessible now, it must have been extremely remote when they settled here 50 years or more ago, and I am really impressed by the pioneer spirit they showed. Not only was it remote then, but they must have felt terribly alone, not even speaking the local language.

In any event, we gabbed with the patriarch and his elderly friends as best we could in the din. There was great amusement at my presence, as I was probably the first foreigner ever to visit this area. One slightly tipsy guest kept coming over to fill my water glass with a powerful local brand of whisky called "Mekhong." (It is not aged before use; the date of production is stamped inside the bottle and it is rarely five days before consumption.) Another guest came over to practice some English phrases with me -- he was actually pretty good. And of course some of the children approached to pull the hair on my arms, a miraculous sight to the comparatively hairless local residents who had apparently never seen a live foreigner before. (I frequently had this experience in rural Vietnam too.)

From another circle near ours I was invited to dance by a merry young fellow we had met on earlier visits, and perhaps I should say a word about that. It is quite a common sight for members of the same sex to dance together, even hold hands or put arms around one another in walking down the street. I saw this in Vietnam too, where it is an ordinary sight without any sexual overtones. Thai dancing is a bit different, though. I am not an expert on its origin, but from casual observation it appears to me that the village-style dance such as I was invited to take part in is strongly influenced in hand and body movements by Thai "classical" dancing, in turn from the Burmese and the Khmer and going back to Indian beginnings. The two partners face each other and follow a vaguely jitterbug foot movement, but slower. Hand movements are extremely elaborate, with the fingers sometimes spread, sometimes pointing, sometimes curved back, in what appears to a foreigner as effeminate gestures. I had never performed such a dance before, but judging from the roars that arose from the guests at my performance, I apparently have some hidden reservoir of talent. I was invited back to the floor several more times!

During the course of the evening we were also introduced to the two candidates for the monkhood. One is a student at Prasarnmit Teacher's Training College, and another has just completed high school. Both were dressed in white shirts and white dresses and had had their heads shaved in the style of a monk. All this was by way of signifying the transition they were about to make; the following morning they were to trade their white for the saffron robes of the monk. Both seemed very pleased and excited at the prospect of what lay ahead.

Although one can become a monk at any time of the year and at any time in one's life, it is commonest during youth and during the Buddhist Lent, which begins just after the rice planting is completed, and just as the rains arrive. According to tradition Buddha forbade his disciples from travelling about during the rainy season, and this thus became the origin of the custom of entering the monkhood during this particular time of year. Whatever the historical origin, this is certainly the best time, as there is little labor requirement in the countryside, and travel is very

difficult anyway.

I have drawn on page 4 the layout of the house where the party was being held during the rainstorm, showing the circles with guests seated on the floor and the seats at which the highest-status guests, the monks, were located. We had brought one monk with us from the provincial seat, the young fellow whom Naa Sawang called "luang phii." Later an older monk arrived, I suspect the abbot of the Don Chedi temple where the two ordainees were to move the next day to take up residence. As he took his position in the seat of honor opposite the "stage" (actually another old teak house, onto which the larger structure had been added), an interesting reaction took place from the guests, which spoke volumes to me about Thai attitudes toward authority. A number of adults rushed over to "krab" the old monk, that is, to clasp the palms together in a prayerful gesture and press the forehead on the floor three times. Some pressed their foreheads against his thigh or lap instead. At the same time, this was not done with any sense of awe; instead the adults paying respect all seemed to know the monk personally, their faces were aglow with smiles, and there was the impression of paternalistic good will. Significantly also, many parents rushed their children (even tots) over to "krab" the monk, and where the babes were not yet familiar with the gesture, the parents firmly grasped their hands together and pushed their heads down on the floor.

If we were to compare this gesture with some Christian counterpart, we would probably say it corresponds to the respectful gesture of the Catholic in kissing the jeweled shoe of the Pope. But this Thai incident argues to me the greater pervasiveness here of the "compliance ethic," since this kind of greeting is reserved in Thailand not just for the head of the Church but for, apparently, any senior monk. The behavior of the parents with the children, too, suggests the importance that Thai attach to this ethic, and how early and thoroughly it must be learned. (I should add parenthetically that I have been interviewing highly-educated Thai government officials about economic development programs, and one of my questions is how they account for the passivity of their countrymen in the face of economic inequality. They invariably have responded: "Thai Buddhism." As I have tried to point out in earlier letters, I don't think this is the entire answer, since people of other faiths show the same passivity. Nevertheless, it is significant that they give this answer, even if, or especially if, it is wrong.)

The arrival of the torrential rain was unfortunate, but even so more than 100 guests attended (though far more had been expected). One of the casualties of the weather was the "likay" performance, a kind of Thai musical show recounting typical fairy tales of kings and princes of olden times. One of the aspects of Thai ceremonies that a foreigner like myself initially finds strange is this tendency to mix the solemn and the fun-filled. Hence at this ordination ceremony, something on the order of a confirmation ceremony for a Christian, there was a band, loud music and dancing, and a dramatic performance, while at a Thai funeral there may be a similar dramatic presentation just before the cremation. At the same time that hundreds of people are sitting before the coffin with palms raised in a respectful position listening to the monks chanting prayers, others will be standing to the side or back eating meals, joking, gossiping, or discussing business or personal affairs.

Another important aspect of such ceremonies is that they are occasions for redistribution of resources within the local community, following the kinds of processes I have described in earlier letters. Relatively speaking, this is a wealthy family, as I have suggested above. Even so, the ceremony is expensive, and there are pressures

to go all out and spend everything one can afford: the band, the liquor, the musical performance, the decorations, rental of a generator, chairs, tables, tents, and the price of the special foods and desserts. So there are many ways that the resources flow from the well-to-do: direct payments to caterers and performers; free meals to the guests; purchases from local merchants. At the same time, consumption is increased, and the resources which might be a threat if accumulated are instead spread about in the community.

There are also some reverse flows involved, since the ordainees receive gifts from each of the guests. Even with the rainstorm they probably collected about \$250, and if there had been no storm the figure might have gone to \$1500. Indeed a number of people remarked that it was sad there had been a storm because it would cut down substantially on the amount received by the ordainees. After spending one's youth in a Thai village one will have attended hundreds of ordination ceremonies such as this one, and the reciprocal gift-giving over so many years produces an important degree of community solidarity. I suppose you might get a flavor of this by borrowing sugar back and forth over the fence in an American urban setting, but you would certainly not get the intensity of involvement with each other that is apparent here.

Some readers may have noticed another interesting feature of this ceremony. It is a Thai Buddhist ceremony, and I have continually referred to the Thai traditions involved. Yet the patriarch is clearly Chinese: it is apparent in his language, in the Chinese good-luck posters all over the house, in the strongly capitalistic and cash-market orientation of the entire family. Even so, his grandchildren appear to be completely assimilated into Thai values: they speak Thai and have studied in Thai schools (one even is going to become a teacher in a Thai school), and they have adopted the religion of their Thai fellows. My guess is that if I had met the two young men in Bangkok without knowing the identity of their grandfather, I would have no idea of their Chinese origin. Probably the one thing that will carry over indelibly will be the cash-market orientation, a kind of Asian counterpart to the Protestant ethic.

I should make some observations as well on the economic circumstances of this family, as they seem to me to say a good bit about the agricultural potential of rural Thailand under favorable circumstances. The houses, while substantial, are typically rural and, in a sense, unkempt: the pigs and water buffalo live downstairs; there are weeds in the yard, piles of wood and pieces of machinery lying around. But inside it is apparent that this family is a local power to be reckoned with. They have electricity, television, fans, a hi-fi. They also have a six-wheel truck which probably cost about \$10,000, and lots of land. Many family members are skilled laborers, bringing in cash each month.

The foundation of all this wealth, though, had to be the production of rice, since that is all the patriarch could do when he first settled in this area. I asked Naa Sawang what the figures are like this year for rice income. This is not typical of the past, because rice prices are higher this year, but it gives some idea of what a family like this can do.

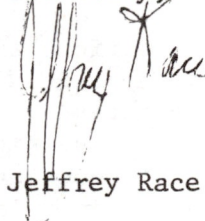
According to Naa Sawang, considering the high rice price but also the high fertilizer price this year, they will make a "profit" of \$50 per rai or \$125 per acre on their rice crop; this however includes some return to their labor in planting and harvesting. Since one family, say of six, can plant 15 acres if they can rent a tractor (which all of Naa Sawang's family does), they can make almost \$4,000 by planting two

crops a year (which they can do since they have year-round water). This is six to seven times the average per capita income in Thailand; in addition, of course, they have cash income from their regular professions as well. They are also fortunate in having a local farm cooperative which will loan them the capital needed for a crop at 12% interest, a very favorable rate, with a foregiveness provision if the crop fails.

As you can see, a family such as this can save enormous amounts of cash if they are willing to live simply, catching fish in the river and eating their own rice and vegetables. The secrets are: 1) own your own land; 2) have dependable year-round water; 3) have access to cheap capital -- your own or someone else's. No doubt this was the process by which the patriarch accumulated his estate. Of course, there are risks. Since I started writing this letter I have had to put it aside to do battle with a case of influenza. During this two weeks it has not rained in the Central Plain or the Northeast, and rice is drying up and dying all over. Naa Sawang's estimate at the end of June of the income from this season's harvest may be 100% wrong if it doesn't rain in another 10 days or so.

To return to the ordination ceremony, we unfortunately had to leave for Bangkok the same day (actually, we left at 11 p.m. and arrived home at 2 a.m.). The actual ceremony, involving bathing the ordainees and changing their robes, took place the next day, along with their escort to the temple preceded by dozens of people performing the Thai classical dances I described above. (We have frequently seen this even in the streets of Bangkok.) Perhaps we shall be able to visit a ceremony next year. The people in the village want to stay in touch. In a typically Thai way, Naa Sawang wants to send one of his sons to live and work with us -- a standard way of forming a rural-urban linkage so that people can shuttle back and forth from that village to the city through a known contact point. We may be able to work it out somehow. In any event, we like Naa Sawang and his family; they have made us comfortable in their own community; and we would like to see them all again.

Sincerely,



Jeffrey Race

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